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AUTHOR Thiebaux, Raananna L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the perceptions of educators, parents, and students in a rural Alaska town concerning educational quality and issues in their schools. A literature review provides background on the history of education in the region, the value of culturally congruent education for Native students, the importance of teacher background in relation to the rural setting and cultural sensitivity, and the shortage of certified teachers in rural Alaska. Interviews were conducted in a remote rural Alaska town in which the population was about 50 percent Native Alaskan (from a variety of cultural groups). Most interviewees were Native Alaskans and included a teacher educator, principals, teachers, parents, and students. Qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed the following major themes: (1) culture (culturally relevant practices in the schools, extreme cultural diversity in the community, inappropriateness of mainstream materials, skepticism about the sincerity of cultural programs, mistrust of educators from "outside," culture shock when students leave the community); (2) school role and functioning (poor quality of some aspects of education, general relevance of school to students' lives, use of the community college for advanced courses, high performance at the elementary level, alternative school for potential dropouts); (3) relations among school, family, and community (parent and community participation, teacher-student relationships, ethnic relations); and (4) social issues (drinking, substance abuse, early pregnancy, family problems). Contains 6 figures and an accompanying key and 40 references.) (SV)

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Inside Perspectives: An Analysis of a Public School Program in a Rural Alaskan Community

May 3, 1996

(Revised March 9, 1997)

By Raananna L. Thiébaux

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Raananna L. Thiébaux

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ABSTRACT

Whether teaching in the northern reaches of Alaska or on the Atlantic stretch of the country, students and their families will likely come from diverse cultural backgrounds. How culture is addressed in the classroom—through relationships between teachers and students, methods of instruction, the school atmosphere, or the course curriculum—can make the difference in the overall education experience. By studying an area that has had to contend with significant cultural issues, in this case rural Alaska, and that has done so partly by addressing them through the education system, perhaps something can be learned by the rest of the nation as it tries to answer its own questions about culture and education.

INTRODUCTION

History of the Topic

The majority population in rural Alaska is Native; Athapaskan, Inupiat, and Yup'ik are a few of the tribes. Isolated or semi-isolated villages may have Native Alaskan populations of ninety-five percent or more; a moderately large town, serving as crossroads for goods and transportation, may have a population of at least fifty percent Native Alaskan (Barnhardt, 1995).

Despite these demographics, formal education has been dominated by non-Native Alaskans. Prior to the purchase of Alaska by the United States, what schools existed were Russian government or missionary. These schools were not, however, accessible to people in villages. In the early 1900s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs established day schools and then later boarding schools in larger towns (Parrett, 1982). Eventually elementary schools were established in villages, but high school education could still only be pursued through boarding schools (Booker, 1987). Since Native Alaskan lifestyle was, and in many cases still is, predominantly sustenance (hunting and fishing) and therefore village based, again few Native Alaskan children were able to attend high school without leaving their communities for long periods of time. Following the Tobeluk v. Lind litigation in 1976, where one family sued for the right to accessible education, village based high schools began to be provided

even if the family of only one student was requesting it (Cotton, 1984).

As elsewhere in the country, for a long time and up until recently, the main intention of formal schooling for Native Alaskans was assimilation, the dissolution of communities, and ultimately the release of land (Cotton, 1984). In the 1960s to 1970s, however, there was an increased appreciation of cultural differences, and recognition of the value of considering culture in education. The National Advisory Council on Indian Education, having Native Alaskan and Native American members, was established as part of the Education Amendments Act in 1972. The result was Native peoples having an increased role in their formal education. While they did not have final say in decisions, they were in a better position to see that their interests and needs were addressed (Pratcha, 1986).

With the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971 returning land and resources to the Native Alaskan people, it became evident that there was a need for advanced education in order to manage developing modern industry. Eventually university based programs were created to prepare people to work specifically in the development of rural Alaska (Booker, 1987). In order to get Native Alaskan students to the university level, however, lower education needed to be more effective (Wanters et al., 1989). Curriculum and teaching methods in village based public schools were thought to be key to this; hence, programs for more adequately preparing professional Native Alaskan teachers for public schools were developed.

Whether mainstream or culturally oriented education is more effective is of some immediacy in the rural Alaskan environment. While the population may be predominantly Native Alaskan, there is still a disproportionate number of non-Native Alaskan teachers; similar conditions exist for administrative personnel (Barnhardt, 1995). Furthermore, these teachers often receive their training from programs designed for more typical environmental, social, economic, and cultural situations than those found in rural Alaska. Because of these factors, who defines the education for which particular population, and how culture and education interact are significant issues.

Background Theory

It is generally accepted that learning built on prior knowledge will be the sturdiest kind of knowledge (Pressley & McCormick, 1995). The contemporary notion is that culture itself is a knowledge base upon which learning can be built; it is a framework unto which perceptions of the world can be organized (Segall et al., 1990). Even the language of a culture is designed to capture symbolically an understanding of the world that is culturally based (Hoijer, 1994). Well before students enter formal schooling, their perceptions and cognitive ways of dealing with the world have begun to form as a result of being part of a specific culture (McCarty et al., 1991; Kawagley, 1993). It is this prior knowledge that learning in a formal school environment builds upon. And because the specifics of a culture are not globally shared, one particular method of instruction or one environmental structure may literally not make sense to a student. Their culture may function or be structured differently than what is being presented.

Despite the long standing multicultural and multiethnic make-up of the United States, education in the United States has been predominantly Eurocentric. History, literature, language, and ways of thinking have been taught from the European point of view and in the context of European values. Even while non-Europeans may have physical access to schools, they have not necessarily had equal access to the benefits of education. Their own history, values, and ways of thinking have been ignored, mocked, or even punished. The solid base of their cultural experience as a source of prior knowledge has been historically neglected; education being received becomes shaky at best. Furthermore, the people themselves as a resource for knowing what might be an effective approach to their own education has been consistently ignored. Pewewardy states that "Indian people are not allowed to be experts on themselves, it's usually someone else *defining* the Indian" (1994). Such a statement could easily be extended to other North Americans of non-European decent.

It has slowly been recognized that different peoples' backgrounds are invaluable to the fabric of and participation in our society. There have subsequently been attempts to nurture and incorporate that which individuals and groups bring with them. Multicultural education is one such attempt, being more inclusive in its

perspectives, more encompassing in the history it teaches. The goal is to make instruction pertain to all cultures and ethnicities, therefore meeting the needs of all students and their familial backgrounds (Banks, 1993; Hardman et al., 1993). It recognizes the value of everyone's cultural background on a personal level, what makes an individual unique, as well as being part of the nation's and ultimately the world's cultural, ethnic, social, economic, and historic whole.

An argument against multicultural education has been that we should not spend so much time and energy focusing on ethnicity and race. There is concern that it not only waters down the quality of education but that it perpetuates divisions between people (Banks, 1993). However, for a population that is significantly diverse, education has already failed and divisions already exist to a discouraging degree. To neglect the philosophy of multicultural education is to ignore the ethical question of who controls knowledge and who has the power to maintain inequalities.

Ethnocentric (other than European) education has also generated fear, being disputed as perpetuating narrow, often false and unscholarly knowledge (Singer, 1994). The issue of creating deeper rifts between people of different cultural and racial backgrounds exists to perhaps even a greater degree than for multicultural education. Again, however, these rifts already exist, and if the high drop out rate of students from minority groups is any indication, trying to educate diverse students from a purely Eurocentric point of view fails (Gilliland & Reyhner, 1988).

The intent of multicultural and culture specific education has been to accommodate the fact that people of different backgrounds will have different experiences in the world and therefore perceive things differently. In practice they may be falling short. Both have received criticism for focusing on artifacts of culture, such as food and historic events. What in practice may be missing is that people of different cultural backgrounds may also learn, think, and understand differently (McCarty et al., 1991; Wauters et al., 1989). Different physical environments may result in differential development of cognitive skills and learning styles; different social and value systems may influence expectations held for human and environmental interactions.

For example, it is believed that a traditional hunting and fishing lifestyle develops an independent, self-reliant personality. Likewise, thought and perception will be field-independent, logical and linear. On the other hand, agricultural societies are more group-oriented and field-dependent, taking into consideration background information including that of the group (Albert & Triandis, 1994; Lieberman, 1994). Intelligence will also take on different meanings depending on what is required and valued by an environment (Gardner, 1993). Whether these specific beliefs are true or not, and there may be conflicting opinions (see Lipka, 1991), there is nevertheless a strong argument that culture should be considered when designing an effective education program for any particular group.

Under traditional European-style instruction, the image of the Native American (and Native Alaskan) student has long been one of silence (Lipka, 1991). At best, this has been interpreted to mean that they have a non-verbal intelligence, or that by their cultural nature they do not express themselves verbally (McCarty et al., 1991; Powell & Anderson, 1994). The flaw of this assessment is that it is based on observations of Native American and Native Alaskan students functioning in a mainstream style classroom. While these observations might be used positively to redesign curriculum and techniques, they could also result in a negative interpretation. They may be identified as incompetent because they do not respond verbally in the classroom, whereas other non-Native Americans and Native Alaskans may be succeeding because of the fundamental design of the classroom system.

Language poses another obstacle. Students are often expected to respond in a language they are not verbally and mentally fluent in. They may be uncomfortable speaking, thus appearing to be non-verbal, while in their first language this is not an issue (Kuhns, 1994).

With increased understanding that student performance is often a function of the environment rather than an inadequacy of the student, the blame has shifted. There is evidence that the "mismatch between the culture of the school and the culture of the home" is the cause of poor performance and experiences in school (Au & Kawakami, 1994). It has been found that by changing the nature of the instruction so that it parallels what

students experience in their communities, students are not non-verbal at all, and are certainly not incompetent (McCarty et al., 1991; Au & Kawakami, 1994). Furthermore,

> Imposing on children ways of thinking and acting that are foreign to their group may make these children less well adapted to living in their own culture. If the school uses methods appropriate to the children's background there is no reason that children of any minority group should make less progress educationally than those of the dominant society. (Gilliland, 1988)

The harm to these students may be doubled when the issue of culture is not addressed. Not only are they isolated while being taught, they also become isolated from their communities.

These phenomena generate the principle behind developing *culturally congruent education*. Adapting curriculum, as multicultural education in practice primarily does, is not enough because the instructional methods have not been changed (McCarty et al., 1991). Rather, it has been proposed that adapting classroom environment and teaching style to emphasize "traditional styles of learning," such as "the transfer of skills by observing and imitating the actions of elders" (Wauters et al., 1989) would result in increased success of Native American students. This is somewhat of a generalization because, by definition, learning style is largely individual. The idea, however, is to capitalize on the degree to which learning style is shaped by culture, and make it work for rather than against student success.

There have been several studies of what culturally congruent education could be like. A study done on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Oregon (Au & Kawakami, 1994) produced evidence that students will participate readily when social structures in the school are similar to those in the community. For example, community life in this population is a group endeavor. Power is not held by any one particular person. If activities in the classroom are run by the whole student body rather than under the sole direction of the teacher, students are found to be willing participants. However, if a classroom is run in the traditional European way, with the teacher the designated leader and the students individually called upon to respond, participation is vastly reduced.

The American Indian Magnet School in Minnesota incorporates traditional Native American practices and values in the classroom. The philosophy is that of "placing education into culture rather than...placing culture into

education" (Pewewardy, 1994), making the entire process of education culturally based.

In an assessment study by McCarty et al., on the bilingual and bicultural Navajo Rough Rock Demonstration School in Arizona, it was indicated that the underlying philosophy of the education and school functioning is perhaps the most significant factor in student success (1991). Regardless of what is being taught, the most important component seems to be the use of traditional philosophy, that of "K'é," or relatedness of all things—social, physical, and cognitive. When instruction is based in this philosophy, regardless of the explicit curriculum or language spoken, student participation increases drastically. At the same time, it is acknowledged that these students are participants in the larger mainstream community and they need the knowledge to deal with it.

St. Mary's Catholic boarding school for Native Alaskans, while not traditional in structure or even curriculum focus, was also found to be successful because of its fundamental philosophy. It attempts a holistic approach—drawing from dimensions of the individual, spirit, nature, and community (including teachers)—more closely matching their traditional world view of harmony and interconnectedness (Kleinfeld, 1982). The result of this approach is that students feel more certain of themselves and less caught between cultural worlds—that of their village homes and that which mainstream education fits into.

A study done in a Yup'ik classroom with a Native Alaskan teacher also provided evidence that participation is enhanced when traditional methods are used. Students are comfortable, trusting, and active in the lessons as long as the classroom and teaching structures and values are culturally familiar (Lipka, 1991).

A population in any particular environment, however, is neither homogenous nor generic. Students are diverse, parents may not hold the same views as their children nor as teachers. So, while the above examples and their goals may be appealing, the outcomes—effectiveness and functionality—may be interpreted differently depending on which segment of the group is asked.

For example, a study done at a school in an Alaskan bush village (Ovanda, 1984) yielded quite different perceptions about the education in that community. Students and parents thought that having more Native

Alaskan teachers would improve schools, and that there should be more Native Alaskan cultural activities, as well as learning more about the world beyond the village. Teachers, on the other hand, felt that increased training in cross-cultural communication for themselves would suffice, and that culture in education was less important. Note that approximately 85% of the teachers in this study were non-Native Alaskan, while closer to 100% of students and parents were Native Alaskan. There is clearly a discrepancy between what the people born and raised in that area feel is important, and what the mainstream population would like to see emphasized.

While in the Ovanda study it was indicated that Native Alaskan teachers and cultural curriculum content are desirable, the most important elements in the experience and success of the student may not be the ethnicity of the teacher, nor perhaps even the curriculum content. Instead it seems the fundamental philosophies and attitudes in the classroom, and the relationships between the students and teachers, are key in having a positive school experience. Therefore, the stance that the teacher takes is paramount, as they have access to facilitating most aspects of the classroom. If teachers understand cultural values and mechanisms of learning as based in culture, either through training or by having been a part of that culture, and have positive attitudes about these, then positive and effective instruction is an attainable goal (Gilliland, 1988; McCarty et al., 1991).

Teachers' own backgrounds are a valuable resource in defining and creating a classroom environment (Carr, 1994). This is especially the case where their backgrounds are similar to that of students. Sharing a similar background, teachers and students will have an easier time reaching a consensus about expectations in the classroom, and understand each other better on a functional level (Albert & Triandis, 1994). Similarly, Native Alaskan teachers who have grown up in rural Alaska will more likely enter the classroom with the necessary understanding and sensitivity for creating a culturally congruent environment. However, just as teachers from other nondominant cultures and ethnicities are not adequately represented in this country, the lack of certified Native Alaskan teachers is a problem even in rural areas where the population is almost 100% Native Alaskan (Barnhardt, 1995). Mainstream teacher education falls short of attracting and keeping Native Alaskan students, and otherwise may not adequately prepare teachers to serve in the rural environment. There is also a high rate of non-Native

Alaskan teacher turnover in rural Alaska, partly due to extreme conditions, adding to the problem of inconsistency in the classroom (Booker, 1987).

Recognizing the value of having teachers whom students can identify and establish stable relationships with and who can create a culturally familiar environment, programs for preparing teachers for rural Alaska have been developed. The Alaska Rural Teacher Training Corps (ARTTC) was established in 1970 for the purpose of preparing teachers for rural and predominantly Native Alaskan environments (Booker, 1987). Later it became the Cross-Cultural Education Development Program (X-CED) and eventually joined the University of Alaska Fairbanks Center for Cross-Cultural Studies.

Training in this program is field-based; student teachers live and learn in rural communities. Students are mostly Native Alaskan or at least have held long-term residence in rural Alaska (Barnhardt, 1995). The philosophy of the program is that these student teachers will bring with them skills and understanding that enhance their abilities as teachers in rural Alaska, just as their young students will bring to the classroom their own cultural backgrounds. The program is designed to be "constructivist"; training is built on experience that student teachers have gained from being members of rural communities. Furthermore, since their training takes place in the actual environment where they will be teaching, it can be customized to fit the particular needs of that environment. And serving the needs of the student teachers, they can undergo training without having to sever ties with their homes and families (Barnhardt, 1995).

Being able to motivate students requires knowledge of what is important to youth in that society, and being able "to motivate according to cultural values" ("Tom," qtd. in Kuhns, 1994). Personal gains that are valued by mainstream society, such as getting into the best higher education institutions or making a lot of money, may not necessarily motivate a Native Alaskan student to achieve. However, a student being responsible for gains felt by the entire family or community, such as bringing a sense of pride, may be a source of personal encouragement. Because these are culturally specific motivators, it is important that a teacher be familiar with this concept, whether they themselves are Native Alaskan or not. Mainstream motivators have been applied throughout history; in fact,

Native peoples who have themselves been through assimilation schools may still believe that they will work ("Danielle," 1995). However, because of the reality of conflicting cultural values, this kind of motivation has been ineffective.

Even if cross-cultural teaching techniques, multicultural sensitivity, and specific cultural knowledge are taught to prospective teachers, it may not be enough. It is not the add-on cultural programs that feed student success, but rather the fundamental philosophies as expressed in educational processes (Sleeter, 1990). In other words, what counts on a deeper level is actual expressed behavior and attitudes. Likewise, acceptance and ability on some level to employ fundamental cultural principles and practices (Kawagley, 1993) can result in success of all involved in the educating process and environment.

It is not a perfect situation. It may be difficult to address the variety of backgrounds of student teachers who are preparing to serve their students' various needs while satisfying State requirements and community desires. Lipka commented in his study of Native Alaskan teaching styles that, despite evidence of culturally compatible teaching methods being most effective for Native Alaskan students, these methods are still not being taught in the X-CED program (1991). Even with special programs meant to improve education in the rural Alaskan environment, outcomes may still not be satisfying community needs.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

How State mandated requirements are met in Alaskan public education is under regional or local control. This means that technically education can take on the appearance and to a degree the function that reflect local needs. Local communities, however, are made up of many groups of people holding different positions and having different needs. Individuals within these groups may come from different backgrounds and may have expectations not shared by the rest of the group. For example, teachers from a mainstream population and trained in an urban setting may not be prepared for what they will encounter in a rural setting. Their expectations of what students need from an education may run counter to what students actually need as members of the local community, as was

found in the Ovanda study (1984).

Parents in any society may want something very different for their children than children want for themselves. In Cotton's report on the establishment of high schools in rural Alaska (1984), parents had expressed that they would like their children to learn "traditional skills and values," and have the ability to thrive in village life. No comment was made regarding whether or not these students wanted to remain in the villages, or about what they hoped to achieve after high school.

This mixture of factors makes it difficult to know if education programs, particularly those that originate from outside the community, are adequately serving the people of that community. Some means of assessment is necessary to determine if program goals, and especially program outcomes, match recipient needs.

One way of approaching an assessment would be through a records analysis (King, 1987), such as comparing program goal statements and student test scores. This approach, however, does not indicate the kinds of experiences that people have as participants of the program, nor what their own expectations of the program are aside from stated program goals.

A more desirable approach uses self-reporting. This involves going directly to the people, questioning across the spectrum of groups involved and making an analysis from this sampling to yield a more complete picture of the program's actual impact (King, 1987).

It seems logical to assess a program from the viewpoint of the people who use it, as it is they who are to benefit from the existence of community based services. Their needs are meant to be at the core of program design: they participate in the programs, take lessons learned from those programs, and must find some way to apply them to their daily lives.

Furthermore, the if the Native world view is of things being interconnected (Kawagley, 1993), and since the rural Alaskan population is largely Native, it also seems appropriate that a study taking place in this community would incorporate multiple perspectives to the greatest degree possible. Taken together, these perspectives would hopefully "provide the most comprehensive understanding of the subject" (Pollard & Kaufman,

1994).

That said, *the purpose of this research was to assess education currently provided in rural Alaska, using the perspectives given by those involved in education as the basis for assessment.*

It was hoped that through this study an initial understanding of the perception of the education's effectiveness, in the context of this community and its people, could be achieved, in addition to uncovering perceived limitations of the current education program. By comparing across the spectrum of people and places they hold in the education system—from teacher education program administrators to young students—as well as across some of the cultures represented in this community, it was hoped to reveal where perspectives mesh, and perhaps where they are mismatched.

On a personal level, by studying education in a cultural environment that is different from my own, I also hoped to begin to understand how in general needs of education might differ and how this might be addressed as a provider of education services.

METHODS

The nature of this research lent itself to a qualitative research approach (Pollard & Kaufman, 1994). Bogdan and Bicklen have said of qualitative research that it attempts to get at *meaning*, that its purpose is to understand "how different people make sense out of their lives," and to illuminate "the inner dynamics of situations" (1992). Because the purpose of this research was to understand how a particular group of people perceive education and how it functions in their lives, this approach seemed most suitable.

The qualitative approach was also appropriate because this is a cross-cultural study, where it is not possible to simply ask a question and expect to be able to take answers entirely at face value. There are messages hidden within words spoken, both the researcher's and respondents', that can either skew or add to understanding. Much of this understanding may be discovered only if the *process* and *context* of the research is included in the research outcomes (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992). An entirely quantitative end product would have necessitated losing this

depth in the study.

This was also an *exploratory* study. Rather than testing a proposed hypothesis, the goal was instead to understand the issues well enough to make future hypotheses possible, as new hypotheses spring from that which is begun to be understand (True, 1983). For example, the original intent of the research was to study a specific interaction between education and the rural Alaskan community. However, because so little information about the nature of rural Alaskan education was available, it was not possible to generate a viable question. A study such as this one would provide a foundation for generating future hypotheses.

Generally, unstructured interviews are used for exploratory studies (True, 1983). Claesson and Brice (1989) recommend using *semi*-structured interview questions to facilitate consistency, particularly for exploratory interviews. Considering the limited amount of time that was available for interviewing, as well as the small sample size, this semi-structured approach was the best choice. Had more time been available, it would have been possible to engage in exploration via extended observation, participation, and unstructured questioning. With only a short time available to gather data, however, most of the weight fell on interview results. Fully structured interview questions were avoided as much as possible to give the interviewees latitude to express themselves more completely (True, 1983).

A key premise of this thesis was that culture has a role in the educating process. Past research in other populations has indicated that culture is in fact important, primarily from the philosophical and instructional standpoint. However, developing interview questions that addressed culture specifically was avoided. To the people of this community, culture may or may not be a vital component in education: Claesson and Brice (1989) emphasized that what respondents consider important issues in education cannot be presupposed. Instead, assessing education based on its "internal" impact, rather than on goals defined by individuals outside of the community, was the intent of this research and was reflected in the interview questions.

It was anticipated that some responses would touch on culture without having to ask directly. By interview design, such responses would have been relatively unprovoked and therefore hopefully more revealing of what the

interviewee really thought. However, if the interviewee had not made any reference to culture, some additional probing would have ensued: the issue of culture in education is significant on some level at least, and should not be missed.

While the primary data source used in the analysis came from formal, prearranged interviews, the actual on-site exploration began before that. The research visit was timed for attending the Inuit Circumpolar Conference General Assembly and Inuit Elder's Conference hosted in the town where most of the research as conducted.

The advantage of attending this conference prior to conducting interviews was several fold. It was an opportunity to get a general overview of what issues are important to northern cultures, and there were opportunities during informal discussions for participant observation. This was a time for immersion, to learn as much as possible in a little time, to begin to notice key issues, to become more familiar with interaction behaviors, and to some degree to sort through the language. As stated by Erlandson et al., "[It is] difficult to communicate with persons whose experience has been shaped in drastically different ways...it is important for researchers to attempt to share the constructions of those whose human setting they are investigating" (1993). By the time formal interviews were conducted, hopefully some of the inevitable confusion that goes along with any new situation would have dissipated, and the task of the interviews themselves more readily focused upon. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, this was a time for establishing a rapport with the people who would be participating in the research (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992).

Interviews

Interview schedules, or lists of ordered questions, were used to facilitate staying on task and to give a basis for comparing results. Questions may have varied depending on the individual situations and as interviewing experience dictated (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992). Once an appropriate set of questions was finalized, that framework was followed as closely as possible in order to make comparisons across the populations being interviewed. While different categories of people being interviewed needed to have slightly different sets of questions (due to their

specific roles in the education system), the target of each interview was the same—that of their personal perspective of the education system.

The interview schedule design included warm-up questions. These were intended to put the interviewee at ease while simultaneously leading to the heart of the question, a question which might by itself be difficult to answer; they were not used in the data analysis (True, 1983). For example, if the information sought after was what a parent would like to see being done for their child, the following line of questioning may have been used to get to the *indicator* question that provided data to be coded:

> How long have you lived here?
> Did you go to the same schools that your children do?
> Have many changes have taken place in how schools do things? How are they different /similar?
> What would you like schools to do for your children in these current times?

Additional probe questions may have been needed to get an answer to the indicator question (True, 1983).

What was avoided were questions so specific that they were leading. How exact the questions became, however, depended on the interviewee response and how quickly they were on their own able to answer within the limits of the research goal. The same approach was used regarding references to culture in education.

Interviews were preceded by a briefing on what kind of questions the respondent could expect, and what their rights were, including confidentiality. Interviews were tape recorded with permission; otherwise, hand-written notes were taken. Recordings were transcribed for coding and for later reference for particularly illustrative quotes. To preserve confidentiality, records were given a letter and number code, rather than name identification.

Participant Observation

During the conference and subsequent conversations, notes were kept regarding commentary on education and its role in the local community. There were also opportunities to engage in informal discussion regarding people's perceptions of and experiences with the school system. For example, during a visit to a nearby village, a few minutes were spent talking to a high school student while browsing in a convenience store. Permission to use information garnered from conversations was acquired prior to any participation, and notes were made following

the discussions.

A key use for this informally acquired information was to refine the proposed interview questions so that the final questions targeted more quickly the prevalent issues in education. It was also used to identify trends during the initial data analysis, but not for establishing quantitative results.

Field Notes

Recommended as an ongoing record of information, experiences and thoughts that occur in the process of collecting data (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992), and as a means for adding depth to the study by picking up "alternative or additional perspectives, [and] phenomenon of interest" not otherwise a part of interview data (Maton, 1993), a field notebook was also kept. It contained descriptions of physical surroundings, observed and experienced interactions, thoughts about research progress being made (or not made), and questions as they arose. By providing descriptive information, these notes rounded out the context and experience of the study.

THE RESEARCH SITE

The site selected for study is a town lying on the edge of the Bering Sea. It is only accessible by air. There are a few gravel roads leading out of it, none of which are more than 70 miles or so long, and only one ending in another village. (One road does end in another built-up area, but it is not really considered to be a village; it is more a "resort" area.) There is one paved road and no traffic lights. Many of the houses are without plumbing. However, compared to many other rural villages, it is still a very developed town with many amenities. It hosts a hospital, a recreational center, a large new grocery store, many craft shops, and a small library. There are separate facilities for the elementary, middle, and high school. There are any number of liquor establishments. Employment here is largely through the Native Alaskan Corporations, the hospital, and the airport. Tourism is also part of the industry, and there is a substantial market for crafts. Smaller villages are often characterized by sustenance living, supplemented with welfare. The population is 50% or more Native Alaskan, depending on how ethnicity is

determined, such as those who are mixed Native/non-Native Alaskan. There are a few African Americans, and a significant number of Asian and Russian descent. Populations in the smaller villages are closer to 100% Native Alaskan.

This site was selected for several reasons. My Alaskan research contact had been a long term resident there. Because of this, she was able to serve as an initiating liaison with members of the education community for interviews. The conference being held there was convenient for attending as part of the research, and it drew people from other villages, some of whom were contacted for interviews. The population of the town is big enough in itself that a fair sampling of representative groups were obtained for interviewing. Using the limited external road system, an excursion to a nearby village was possible, getting a more complete picture of the rural context and pursuing a few more interviews.

THE SUBJECTS

Formal Interviews

Subjects for participant observation and interviews were for the most part Native Alaskan, although not limited to this population. The population that serves and attends the schools in the region where the study was conducted is ethnically mixed. Within realistic research limitations, this was represented in the interview pool. School employees and students who are not originally from this area often leave during the summer, and were subsequently not available for interviews. As these people are more likely to be non-Native Alaskan, there was an under representation of that population in the interview data.

The main subject pool was referred by my Alaskan research advisor who lives and works in the region of study. Prior to going to Alaska, each prospective subject was called for an initial introduction and to ask for verbal consent to a later interview. All conceded, with brief or no hesitation. Follow-up letters with more information about myself and the study were sent. Upon arrival, all were contacted except for one who decided not to come to

the conference. Interview appointments were set up with the others.

It was hoped that from these initial contacts and from attending the conference, additional potential subjects could be contacted. This approach proved to be successful, and several interview appointments were set up.

A total of twelve formal interviews were conducted. These were comprised of one teacher education program administrator (non-Native Alaskan); two principals (both non-Native Alaskan, but one who is otherwise a minority person); four teachers (all Native Alaskan); four students (all Native Alaskan); and one parent (Native Alaskan). One teacher was an elder, and one was interviewed as both a teacher and parent. The data for the program administrator and two of the students were not used in the quantitative data analysis. While they were formal interviews, the interview formats were significantly different, and could not be used for comparison.

Participant Observation

At the conference there were approximately 100 delegates; 150 observers; 45 VIPs and speakers; and several hundred others who held roles such as translation, media, and entertainment. Seven countries were represented. From Alaska, there were approximately 27 delegates, 79 observers, and 22 VIPs and speakers. The conference was a limited source of participant observation subjects as most participants were busy with conference activities. Notes taken from listening to one student who spoke at the conference were used in the qualitative analysis.

Other contacts were made with people while attending the entertainment portions of the conference, during social interactions with acquaintances of our hostess, and as a result of conversations with people in such settings as local craft shops.

Six interactions resulted in useful participant observation data. These were comprised of one principal (non-Native Alaskan); one teacher (non-Native Alaskan but a long-term resident of the community); and four students (two who were Native Alaskan and one who was otherwise a minority person).

DATA ANALYSIS

To code the data, an initial content analysis was done of the overall results. Data from interviews, participant observation, and field notes were used. Sixteen specific themes were identified, then grouped according to four broad categories; these were culture, school role and functioning, relations, and social issues. An other/not sure category was also created.

Each interview transcript was reduced to statements that could be readily categorized. A transcript code was written on each segment and given a sequential number, for easier handling. Working with each transcript, segments were reviewed for content, and their sequential number written into the appropriate theme as found on the coding sheet. In addition to myself, this step in coding was performed by two other individuals who were not familiar with the research and who only knew what themes were being looked for in the interview results. The purpose of having backup coders was to rule out bias in how the statements were coded, and to determine the reliability of the coding system.

Due to the unexpected unavailability of two additional coders, not all transcripts were reviewed by backup coders. This was considered in reviewing for potential bias in the results. Only those transcripts that had backup coding as well as self-coding were used in the reliability test.

A correlation test of coder results was run on the data compiled. Due to the small sample size and resulting small data tallies, correlation tests were run within the major rather than individual response categories. The degree of correlation shown was used to infer the validity of using data patterns to analyze perspectives.

Percentages of responses in each category were made for each group, using data from comparable transcripts. Response percentages were also calculated for combined group responses using all comparable transcripts. Percentages were graphed, showing response patterns for each group and the combined population interviewed. (See Figures 1 through 6 for graphed results.) Clustering within the broad groups was the basis of analysis. As the interview pool was relatively small, peaks occurring in specific theme categories may or may not have occurred for a larger population. However, if there was a particularly strong peak in one theme it was noted in

the analysis. Validity of cluster and peak patterns may be inferred from the reliability test using backup data.

Participant observation transcripts and interviews not following the regular interview schedule could not be used in the percentage analysis. In most cases they did not provide the same breadth or depth of information as the formal interviews; therefore, they are not legitimately comparable. However, they do provide a lot of valuable information and were used in the initial theme analysis, as well as for the qualitative analysis.

The qualitative analysis was supported by looking at specific quotes, and reviewing focal points in comments and interview responses. Quotes were used to create a deeper understanding of what is important to the people in this community in the context of their education system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Validity and Reliability

The correlation test showed that for combined group data within the four broad categories, there was a high degree of correlation. There were neither distinctly opposing nor random results. The most "unreliable" results were found in the other/not sure category, indicating that certainty of coding varied with the coder.

A comment made by one of the coders should be noted in assessing for validity. It was stated that when making an unsure but "best guess" for which category to put a statement into, they would try to distribute them evenly. This may have lead to a skewing or flattening out of results.

Conference and Field Notes

Major topics of discussion during the conference were factors affecting sustenance living, social issues such as drinking, and relations between youth and elders. Most apparent was the frustration of Native Alaskan people who choose to have a "traditional" lifestyle, and the interference they experience by the mainstream social system, including government.

At least for the individuals who spoke, traditional lifestyles, languages, and connections between people are important in their lives. At the same time, there is acknowledgment that mainstream lifestyles and associated skills are also important; however, it is evident that tradition is the preferred framework.

Education as a specific topic was not addressed, but reference was made to it as a vehicle for resolving problems in the community. Following traditional practices is seen as a way of appeasing social problems affecting youth. Elders want culture and language to be taught in school so that they may communicate better with their youth. Communication is something that all generations are interested in working on but, because of increasing influence of outside or changing cultures, they have found it difficult to do so.

Interviews and Participant Observation

Formal interviews provided the data that was used to show trends within groups and to make comparisons. Both interviews and participant observation provided data to be used for qualitative analysis, which was the intended focus of this research. Therefore, they are considered together.

Culture Culture as a broad theme was a primary area of focus. Principals, teachers, students, and parents all showed clustering in this area. The specific topic of coping with culture was emphasized for all groups interviewed. Students also showed a focus on attitude regarding culture, and parents showed a focus on cultural issues. Students are directly subjected to attitudes regarding culture, be that by what teachers project or by the messages hidden in a selective curriculum. Parents grew up with having to make major cultural adjustments between how their own parents grew up and what their children now experience.

Culture shows a high concentration of commentary and interview response amongst Native and non-Native Alaskans alike. Residents are similarly affected by the remoteness and climate of the region, as well as by the industry. Schools can have and in many cases do have a role in preparing students for, or otherwise accommodating to, life in this region. For example, outdoor survival clubs and courses in small engine repair may

be available as part of the school program.

Approximately half of the student population is Native Alaskan, some practicing sustenance living with their families, some whose parents grew up speaking their Native Alaskan language. Differing values and communication characteristics pose challenges between the school system and community. For example, the issue of "wait-time," the time recommended to wait for a response after asking a question, as well as other differences in communication styles were mentioned by several interviewees. The wait-time for Native Alaskan students may be much longer than for non-Native Alaskan students, and non-Native Alaskan teachers often have difficulty accommodating this. There is also the possibility of misinterpreting Native Alaskan student intelligence, for traditionally they may learn by observation of their experienced elders, rather than the constant verbal interaction that marks mainstream learning environments. Schools may provide inservices for teachers on topics of communication and learning styles, led by Native Alaskan people of the community.

Native Alaskan parents may have the traditional belief that the teacher is the authority and should not be questioned. There may also be fear associated with these views. One teacher stated that, "Sometimes Native parents don't want to meet the teacher at all: they never know who their kid's teacher is. They are afraid." A teacher who understands this, or one who is able to speak a Native Alaskan language, is better able to put a parent at ease. This is especially the case when the student's guardian is a grandparent, where cultural values may be even more deeply ingrained. Teachers are encouraged to be sensitive to these and other cultural differences, and be gently persistent in their interactions with families.

Also posing a problem is that there is really not one ethnic culture represented in this region. This particular community is extremely diverse in both its Native and non-Native Alaskan population. This presents difficulties in trying to design appropriate cultural programs. For example, a school may decide to teach a Native Alaskan language: because there are numerous dialects represented, however, which language to teach becomes the question.

Curriculum materials that are developed for a mainstream context are sometimes inappropriate, often

catering to a different cultural life experience. One parent commented:

> For the Native people, the curriculum should come from their point of view....They don't understand traffic lights, we don't have any here. Don't understand frogs, we've never seen them. It should come from their own environment.

There is increasing interest in the community to become involved in designing materials that are appropriate to the region and the people. Sometimes materials can be supplemented, maximizing students' learning by drawing on what is familiar to them, their experiences and environment. For example, the elementary school may bring in materials such as fish and musk ox heads, organisms that most students have seen before, to study as they learn about life science. Enterprising teachers are able to use the immediate environment as a valuable resource.

The most evident cultural inclusion in the schools are bicultural/bilingual classes, available from elementary through high school. Teachers are usually but not always Native Alaskan. Students learn Native Alaskan languages; which one may depend on what their teacher is fluent in. They also learn crafts and skills, such as ivory carving or dancing. There are also courses in self sufficiency, and outdoor skills classes are currently expanding.

When there is an interest expressed in an additional aspect of cultural practices, such as kayak building, supplemental instruction may be provided. However, such accommodations have sometimes been offered, only to have students choose not to participate. Perhaps because of what has happened in the past, culturally based programs often have a stigma attached. Parents, including Native Alaskan parents, may not want their children to participate, suggesting that those programs are not for the serious students. Often students will not participate because it's "not cool." Culture in education seems to be pulled at from all sides, and in part at least remains an unsettled issue.

Despite the apparent efforts to accommodate a mainstream school system to a population having a predominantly different cultural background and experience, there is still some question as to the sincerity of these actions. Several interviewees expressed that they suspect that importance of culture in education is just being given lipservice. As in the past, the bare minimum may be being done, or programs may be under used or misused. For

example, the high school had a migrant student program that was to provide academic support for students whose families left for part of the year for sustenance living. A student, examining this more closely, found the actual facility to be minimal, probably lending more to these students' failure than their success. Whether this is a result of funding or organizational problems, or silent prejudices, is at this point left to speculation.

Most teachers and administrators come from outside of rural Alaska, from entirely different cultural backgrounds and experiences than into which they are placed. They are often met with skepticism by the community as to their reasons for being there, such as only to make money or increase retirement benefits. This is fueled by the fact that often imported staff do not get involved in the community or otherwise show little interest in the culture and lifestyle. Furthermore, these staff often only last for a short time, perhaps one school year, before they move on to a new location. Whether it is the case or not, this is perceived as having a negative attitude towards the people, region, and culture.

A recommendation made by several interviewees was that prospective teachers be required to learn about the region before coming, perhaps have a trial period, and to assess closely their own cultural beliefs and prejudices. Ideally this would result in attracting teachers and other staff who are genuinely interested and committed to the area, and who would stay for an extended period of time.

Other areas where cultural issues show up is when students leave their communities. These students usually land in a physical environment very different from where they grew up, and coupled with exposure to a new and unfamiliar set of values, will experience culture shock. The end result is very often that they drop out and return to their villages. One principal remarked that Native Alaskan parents, if their children are having difficulty, will encourage them to come home rather than complete their endeavors outside. As more students have opportunities to have experiences outside their communities, such as for senior trips and work/study programs, the incidence of these difficulties may diminish.

Even for those who successfully complete post-secondary education programs, most seem to return to their communities to live. Following their experiences outside, they often return with a broader view of the world

and a desire to make changes in their communities, mainly regarding social problems. Notably, interest in their culture as a valuable aspect of their lives and the life of the region is often renewed.

School role/functioning School role and functioning also showed some degree of response clustering. However, the specific topic that stood out across all groups was that of proclaimed school role and actual outcomes. This should not be a disappointing discovery, as it would be hoped that schools would concern themselves heavily with this issue. What may have been surprising was the amount of emphasis that students put on this topic.

Several groups shared the sentiment that the quality of education falls short of what they need in order to survive beyond the public school system, be that in post-secondary education or employment situations. One student reflected on her freshman year at college and her struggles with English writing classes, stating:

> I didn't know what a thesis was, or what elements of writing meant. I had to figure all of that out. And looking back now I just can't believe what [public school] teachers got away with....I thought I was really set, but I was really naive. When I came back I thought about writing to the school board, because I was so unprepared.

Weaknesses in preparation are recognized by school administrators as well, mostly pertaining to work related skills rather than post-secondary education. One principal stated that the schools are trying to improve student preparation for the workforce, especially since most will go on to work rather than pursue higher education. This has entailed finding out the needs of future employers by asking them directly, and by observing problems that current employers and employees in the community have. For example, schools are trying to instill a work "ethic" in their students, developing in them a sense of responsibility and pride, evidently scarce in the current workforce.

The general relevance of school to students' lives was mentioned in several other contexts as well. Students on the academic track desire better preparation for surviving away from their communities, so that they may successfully complete post-secondary education paths. High performing students who wish to enter the technical workforce have indicated that they are not acquiring the skills needed by that level of job. They also express interest in learning more about the region's cultural and political history, current events, and how their community

fits into the broad spectrum of the nation and on a global level. To be sure, advances in these realms are being made, but real progress is subject to limited resources associated with rural circumstances.

Several groups felt there should be more choices available, such as upper level math and science courses, as well as more diverse language courses. Satellite courses to some degree supplement choices; however, this is challenged by distances from teaching centers and time differences which affect the ability for students to communicate with those instructors. More and more, the community college in the subject town is being drawn on to provide upper level and other more varied instruction.

At the elementary school level, the sentiment expressed was somewhat different. An administrator stated that the schools are as good as if not better than the national average at preparing their students, especially in math and science. Currently they are looking at improving connections between staff at the different levels of schooling, in order to prepare students at the elementary level to do well at the middle and high school levels. The hope is that they will be able to carry the high performance trend found at the elementary level through to the upper levels.

Drop out is not seen as an unusually big problem, but this is not by chance. The region carries a burden of social problems, which under ordinary circumstances would result in many students dropping out of the school system. In addition, there may be a cultural discrepancy between what is available in the regular school system and conditions under which Native Alaskan students in particular may be able to perform better. Described by one teacher, for example, under traditional circumstances Native Alaskan students would be taught one-to-one, whereas in schools the ratio is of course much higher. Accommodating these problems is the "alternative school," where high school students who might otherwise drop out can complete their education and at the same time get employment training skills.

The alternative school uses a modified daily schedule and tutors or aides, most often Native Alaskan, to increase available one-to-one attention. Aides are responsible for helping with course work and job training; they also give students personal support. For example, if a student fails to show up for school, the aide will go to that student's house and be a force behind getting them to attend. These aides were described as being "like parents,

counselor, and teacher all in one." The success of the alternative school system in this district is evident, as there has been only an estimated .5% dropout rate, all within the last four years.

Relations The category encompassing relations in the education community also had a significant incidence of response. Relations between school, family and community, and attitudes affecting relations were consistently high scoring points of focus. Students are the only ones deviating from this peak: their focus lay in staff and student relations.

According to one principal, parents are likely to be involved in their children's education, so long as not restricted by cultural values. The community as a whole seems to work well with the school system, mostly in providing feedback regarding industry employment requirements, which helps to improve education goals.

Participation of the community in the education system has proved both fruitful on one hand and neglected on the other. Members of the community outside of the education system who have skills that are valuable to students, such as coaching, were at one time invited to participate in school activities. Evidently this is no longer encouraged, for reasons that were not verifiable but possibly related to avoiding having funds cut. On the other hand, the elementary school at least has encouraged the involvement of the community in school cultural activities, in an effort to bring the two closer together. Parents may also serve as volunteers in the classroom, strengthening the bonds between families and schools, and working to achieve common goals.

Students commented frequently on relations between students and school staff. Students pick up on when teachers not only care about what they are teaching or how well their students are doing, but also when they show genuine interest in their students and in their backgrounds. It is an appreciated feature of a teacher or other school personnel when they take the time to get involved in the community where students live. The sincerity comes through, and students feel better about being part of that teacher's classroom, not surprisingly resulting in better academic outcomes. (Parents are also more likely to become involved if the interest is found to be two-way.) According to several students interviewed, the key is not in what a teacher's background is, but rather that they act out of caring and respect.

One principal described the students in this community as being quite different than those that might be encountered elsewhere. They were described as being tough on the outside and at the same time are very caring about the welfare of their peers. On the other hand, they have also been described as being unusually mean, particularly towards each other. The school personnel have to deal frequently with prejudices amongst the students, especially between the Native Alaskan students originating from different geographic regions, and feel that the battle is against values that are prevalent in the general community. According to this principal, for teachers and other school personnel to develop good relationships with their students, they need to respect cultural and social differences, and give students space to resolve problems independently.

Social issues The final broad theme where many responses fell was that of social issues. Primarily this refers to social issues that affect students in a way directly relevant to school, such as drinking and early pregnancy. Social issues affecting students beyond the school experience scored low for most groups except for students themselves. They seem aware of the social reality that they must face after they get out of the school system.

Alcohol is in particular a problem. One interviewee suggested that this problem is fueled by an overabundance of drinking establishments in this town. The results of alcoholism go beyond adult related behaviors, and are evident at the elementary school level as fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effect. The local police department operates a D.A.R.E. program in the schools in an effort to interrupt the cycle of substance abuse. Schools may have extracurricular activities that provide students with healthy social outlets, but in villages where resources are more limited, youth are more likely to adopt harmful social habits. Some villages have opted to be "dry," the outcomes of which were not verifiable in the scope of this study.

Perhaps less easy to address is the problem that many students may encounter at home. For example, they themselves may be drinking, or their parents may be drinking and they are left with the responsibility of siblings. In reference to difficult home situations, several young interviewees expressed hope that teachers would learn to not criticize the community, particularly when teachers have come from outside. They also hope that teachers themselves find a healthy outlet for their frustrations, keeping it out of the classroom because students experience

enough conflict in their own lives. This understanding for the conditions that exist in the community factors into classroom functioning and student/teacher relations; one teacher stated, "There's a lot of students that need to be listened to. They have a lot of major problems at home."

Students may also be used to living without a lot of family guidance, posing problems for teachers who are most comfortable with being "in charge" of the classroom. One principal's experience has been that students are not afraid to defy their teachers, and that a relaxed approach may be more effective in dealing with students on a daily basis. For a classroom situation to work, teachers need to be in tune with their students' lives, because of the close connection between the two arenas, and because teachers cannot extricate themselves from the workings of the community.

Social issues also appear in the context of culture. Students whose families live traditionally may come into conflict with school goals. One teacher stated that:

> Teachers have academic expectations, and some of the traditional parents don't have that; reading is not important to the family. What is important is getting the food ready for the winter, putting away the seal meat, and making mukluk bottoms, buying gas for hunting. That's what's important to the family.

A principal observed in the community other patterns associated with traditional living, such as:

> 'My mother got married at 13 or 14, so I'm expected to.' I think it's kind of a cycle. But they have to break the idea that just because it happened to their mother or father doesn't mean that it has to happen to them.

Traditions may create a cycle, compounding social problems that may lead to not completing school, posing additional challenges for students. Another principal observed that often when students don't finish school, they stay in their villages and rely on sustenance living supplemented by welfare, and are otherwise unable to do anything for their livelihoods.

Social problems are not restricted to the Native Alaskan population but are nevertheless predominant in this sector. A solution might be found in cultural development. One interviewee observed that when students can explore and learn to appreciate their heritage, they feel better about themselves and achieve greater success. Another

comment made was that Native Alaskan youth do very well in their lives when they are closely tied to traditional lifestyles. When they are put back into the mainstream system, including the public school system, they revert back to unhealthy behavior.

The impact of social problems is evident even for those who complete high school and go on to post secondary education. A situation was described where a student went on to college with the benefit of scholarships, but due to homesickness and culture shock in general, began to drink heavily and eventually dropped out. Another observation was that students often feel they have very little to go to once out of school, especially since the educational focus may not be really relevant to their lives and circumstances. Students are constantly challenged by the patterns found in their communities and by a school system that may not be fully preparing them for success in their given environment.

Teacher Education Program Administrator The interview schedule for the teacher education program administrator was irregular, catering very specifically to a unique position in the education system; however, liberty was taken to see how it compared to the other results. Again there was an emphasis on culture, coping and issues, as well as history, politics, and ethnicity. The most noteworthy peak was in the specific category of community as a resource. This goes along with the stated intent of the teacher education program, that teachers' skills are to be developed according to the needs of the communities that they come from and will be teaching in.

The fact that there are a few parallels to the other data, despite the interview having a different focus, warrants a remark. The concerns of the people responsible for training teachers for these communities may not be too far off from the concerns of the community. Nevertheless, the different interview formats limits how much comparison can be made between these groups.

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of education in this rural Alaskan community is several-fold. One is cultural enrichment, through study and experience of the Native Alaskan and regional culture, as well as the many different ethnicities and

cultures that comprise this area. It is also to prepare students to function in their immediate environment, and to be competitive on a national level. Finally, it is to teach students in a manner most conducive to their learning, given their backgrounds. What might be deduced from interview responses and other comments is that, while the effort is apparent, these goals are not yet being achieved. Many aspects of education in this community are culturally congruent or closely so; education is drawing on the cultures of the people, Native and non-Native Alaskan, and of the region. And where success in this goal has not yet been achieved, there is interest for continually improving.

For the most part, concerns regarding education in this rural Alaskan community are shared among individuals and groups interviewed. Students, teachers, principals, and parents all addressed with similar degrees of emphasis those issues of culture, school role and functioning, relationships found within the education community, and social issues that have an impact on education. This was evidenced by response data having similar peaks in those broad themes, within categories of people interviewed and across categories. Because no non-Native Alaskan teachers were officially interviewed, it is not possible to remark on whether non-Native perceptions of the education system differ significantly from those of Native Alaskans.

In research reality, it is difficult to know how much of the response results were artificially produced by the interview questions or by the coding scheme. However, it can be safely concluded that the described issues are probably significant; the interview questions were by design intended to prompt interviewees to speak as much or as little as they desired, and the depth of collected comments could not be artificially produced.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the hazards of any study that crosses cultures is the presumption that those on "opposite sides" of the cultures will understand each other, respond in an interpretable manner, or share enough similarities that communication will not be overly hindered (Barna, 1994). Interviewing across cultures for the purpose of getting at the heart of the matter, hearing "the word" from the people themselves, poses interpretive challenges. In

addition, the "interviewer effect," where subjects modify their responses (consciously or not) because they know they are being observed, is also well documented (True, 1983); respondents may give answers that they think the interviewer wishes to hear, rather than what they really think.

Speech mannerisms and non-verbal behaviors may hold subtle, culturally based meaning. By paying close attention to this "metacommunication," it may be possible to "find clues to the interpretation the speaker wishes to attach...to the words" (Briggs, 1986), in other words, find the meaning hidden in the words. With a limited experience of cultural innuendos, it may be difficult to "hear" or "see" the message.

Because of the issue being examined, there are social and political overtones that can affect how people respond (Briggs, 1986). For example, if there is concern about job security or about services being taken away, teachers and parents may not express complaints about programs. Similarly, children may respond with what they think their parents want to hear, and parents may respond with what they think the interviewer wants to hear. This is not a factor that can easily be controlled for, other than being aware, trying to "listen between the lines," and resisting the confines of cultural filters.

Field notes are also a place where interpretive errors can occur. What stands out as significant enough for a researcher to write down may not be at all significant as far as the subjects of the study are concerned. Likewise, lacking the experience to recognize subtleties that are nevertheless significant in that culture, lifestyle, or environment, it is possible to inadvertently create gaps in understanding the topic. On the other hand, if diligently used, field notes can also be a means for capturing these subtleties.

In this study, the sample size and duration of "hands-on" research are also limitations. With relatively few representatives of the chosen categories, it is risky to make generalizations of perspectives and how they compare across categories. It is only possible to begin to put together a picture of how people in this particular area of rural Alaska perceive their education, and speculate on how the goals of the education providers (program planners, administrators, and teachers) are on target with what the recipients (parents and students, and in some ways the teachers again) expect or get. A short on-site time is limiting because it permits little time to "warm up," to get by

cultural communication differences, and to build up the trust of the community in the researcher and research activities.

The soundest advice given in the course of this project, facing the challenge of the cross-cultural research situation, was to at all times go in with eyes open, not filter what was seen or heard, never imitate how the people expressed themselves, but learn from them and from my own mistakes. Any research situation has limitations that have to be accepted and, to the best of the researcher's ability, be considered when interpreting results.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This was an initial exploration of the current education system in one location of rural Alaska. The intention was to look, ask, and listen carefully to what was said and not said as the education and its recipients' perceptions were explored. A safe conclusion at this stage is that there are issues worth giving consistent and careful consideration to, and that the people are the carriers of these worthy messages from which educators all over can learn. This was a chance to listen and learn from people who have contended with and continue to contend with an education that largely has originated from outside their own culture. People such as these are in the position to instigate change (Weismantel & Fradd, 1989); they may be the voice as well as the active force of a community.

It is a goal that studies like this, in conjunction with similar studies of different dimensions of the topic, would be used to evaluate the effectiveness and desirability of public programs (Shore & Keepers, 1982). As stated by Tomlinson and Callahan, "evaluation...is ongoing, and each well-designed and well-conducted examination of a program will aid in strengthening future assessments" (1994). Errors are an inevitable component of all research, but it is these errors that will help strengthen future work.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Currently, the value of the Cross-Cultural Education Development Program that prepares teachers for

teaching in rural Alaska is being assessed. Partly related to funding issues, and partly for questioning its utility, cutting of the program is being considered. The results of this study will hopefully, however, lend credence to the value of preparing teachers in a cultural context, such as this program largely has. There is undeniable evidence that the formal development of an understanding of the dominant, historically and actively significant culture is vital to the success of the learning environment and process, at least in this particular community. Likewise, teaching styles and curriculum are domains where such an understanding needs to exist, as these are hopefully developed to best suit the community where they are implemented. On an ongoing basis, and in the context of the community, existing inservice professional development programs might be enhanced or new ones developed.

There are also implications from this study that suggest that becoming an active member of the community, perhaps just as much a frame of mind as an action, is as vital to the success of the educator as it is to the educated. For education relationships to be effective, members of the education community need to establish comfortable working connections with the community—the people as well as their culture. New educators can be helped to establish themselves into a context often different from their own immediate backgrounds by developing an appreciation for, and participation in, the culture of the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

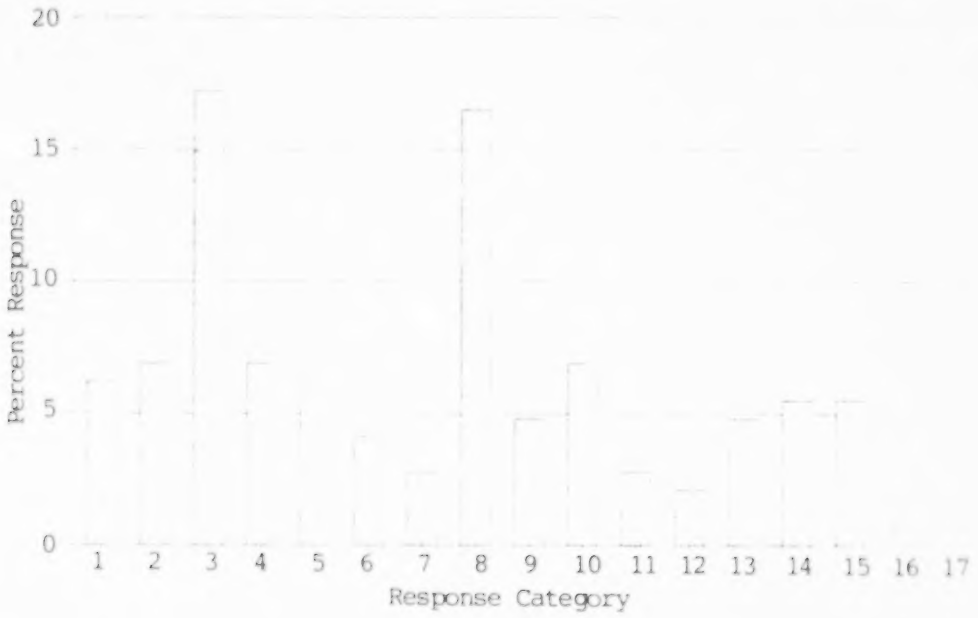
As no teachers originating from outside the rural Alaskan region were interviewed, it was not possible to get a comparative perspective, revealing their expectations and findings of education in this environment. Several representatives from each group who were interviewed alluded to problems related to teachers originating from outside the region; comments were significant enough that further investigation is warranted. The goal of such a study would be to seek solutions that benefit both the teachers and the recipients of educational services. For example, it was recommended multiple times that prospective teachers visit an area before committing to it; they should also be encouraged to examine closely their beliefs about culture and different social climates. Understanding the experiences of teachers who have not done this prior to accepting a position in an unfamiliar

region might help facilitate better results.

The provision for and related success of the alternate school program to reducing incidence of drop out is another aspect arising out of this initial investigation that should be explored further. The traditional school situation is not one that works for all students, and students are often lost unnecessarily because more suitable provisions are not made. The alternative school system appears to work well in this community, helping more students complete high school and gain valuable work experience, and might elsewhere as well.

Relations between school and community were a subject of frequent and thought provoking commentary. Because most students seem to remain in the communities where they attend school, it would be valuable to explore further how school and communities might better serve each other. For example, programs that involve students helping in the community might provide learning opportunities and improve confidence. It may also give students the sense of having a place to go after completing high school, as they become more involved in the region they live and see different possibilities that exist for them there. It also benefits the community, immediately in the form of service and down the road as it facilitates preparing students for the needs of the area. A study in this area could reveal what similar programs may already exist, and what interest there may be for it in other schools and communities.

Finally, a comparative study should be done between the perspectives of those directly involved in the education community and those in the corporate community, especially where the flow of money is concerned. There may be differences between these two communities regarding what is seen as important in the general role of education, as well as in developing specific curriculum and defining the educational context. If differences do exist, an exploration in this domain may reveal potential "hidden agendas" that lead to weaknesses in the ability for either to provide quality services for the community as a whole, and may ultimately be a springboard for seeking solutions.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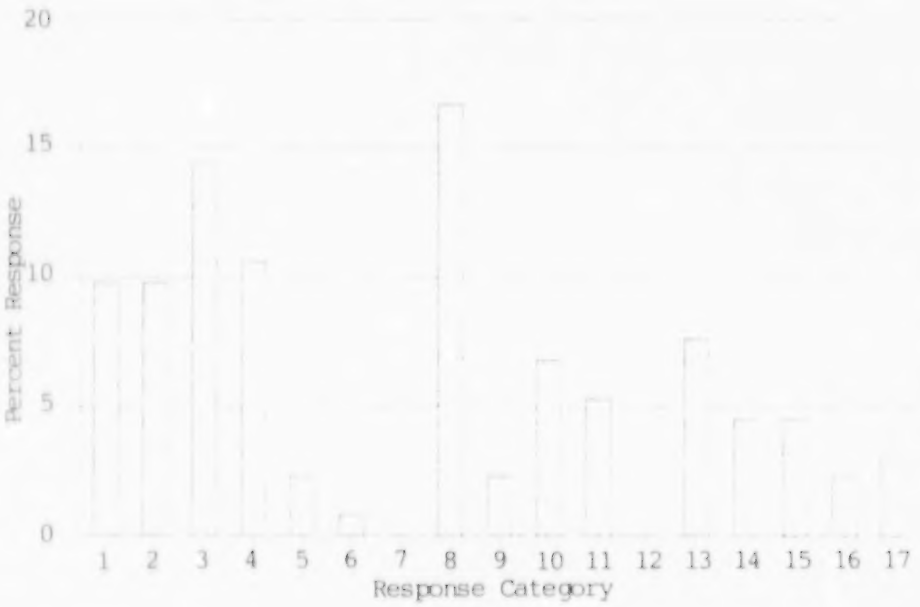
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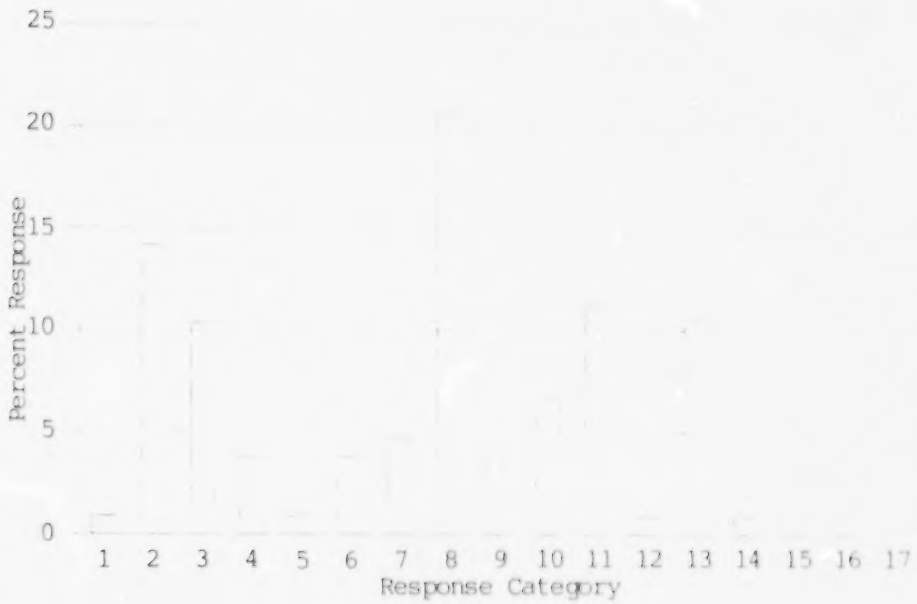
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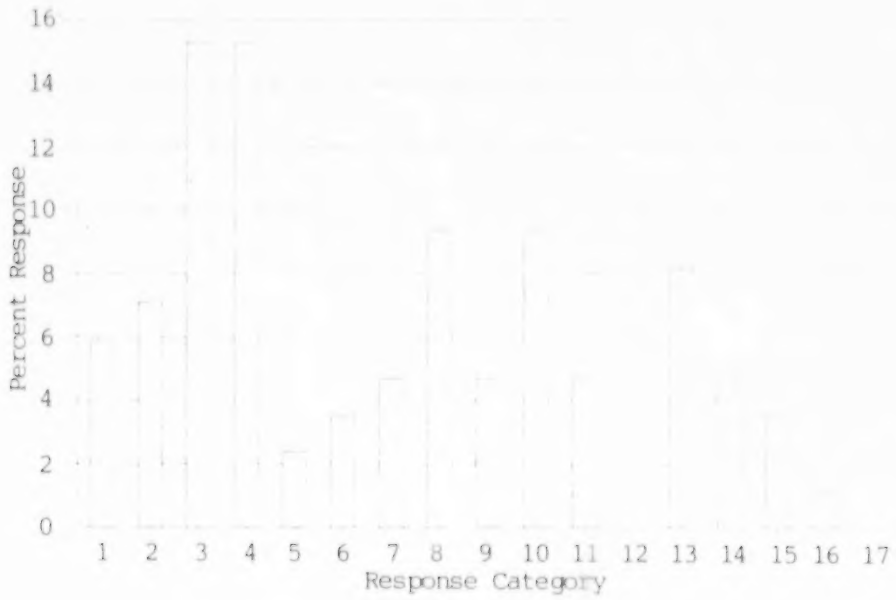
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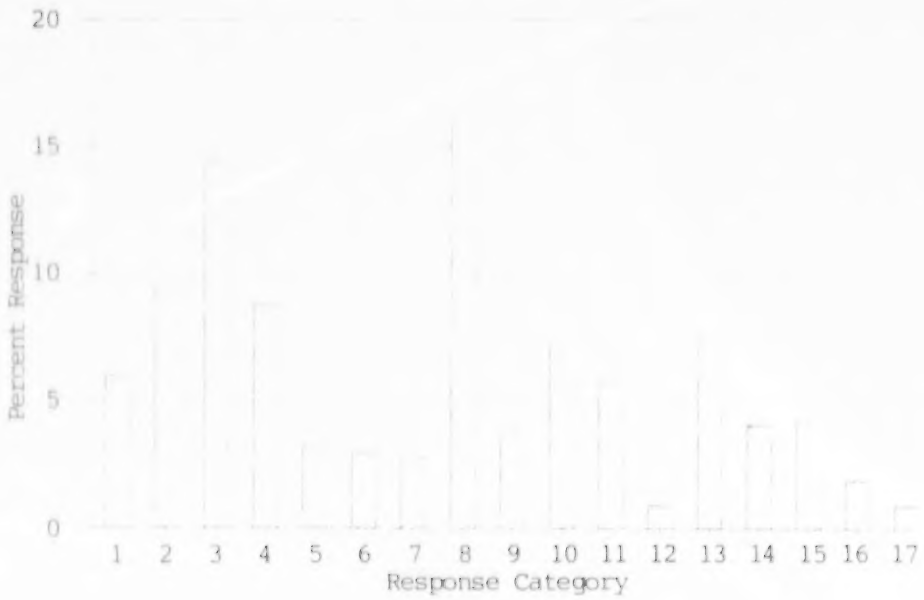
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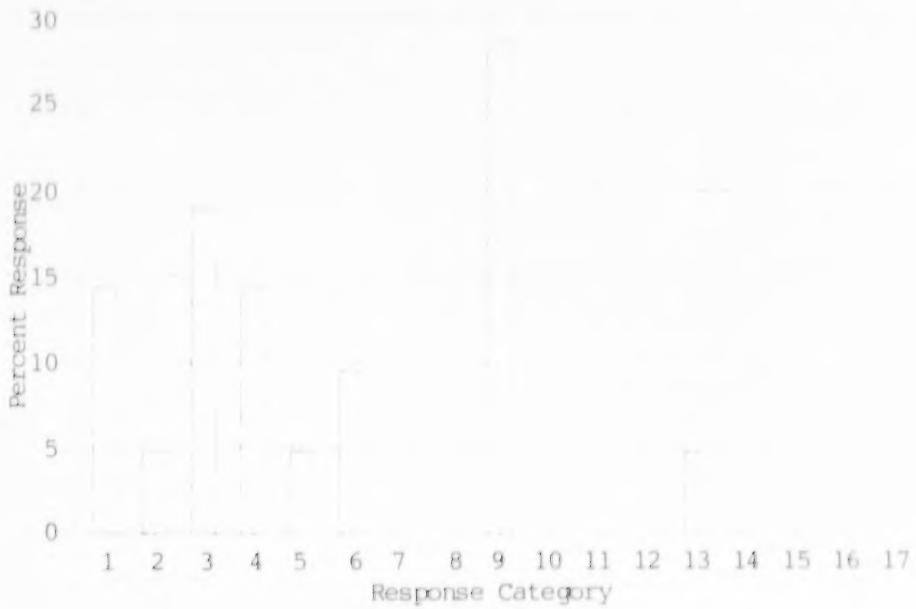
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Response Category

Figure 1: Percent Response in Response Categories for Principals.

Figure 2: Percent Response in Response Categories for Teachers.

Figure 3: Percent Response in Response Categories for Students.

Figure 4: Percent Response in Response Categories for Parents.

Figure 5: Percent Response in Response Categories for Combined Groups—Principals, Teachers, Students,& Parents.

Figure 6: Percent Response in Response Categories for Teacher Education Program Administrator.

Key to response categories:

CULTURE
1 = History, politics, & ethnicity
2 = Attitude re: culture/environment/people/culture based programs
3 = Coping w / culture/cultural differences; culture based programs
4 = Cultural & environmental differences: style, language, etc. / issues

SCHOOL ROLE/FUNCTIONING
5 = Staff preparation: general
6 = Facility & program: general
7 = Relevance of school: general
8 = School role: proclaimed / Outcomes
9 = Resources: community/environment

RELATIONS
10 = School & family/community relations
11 = Staff & student relations
12 = Student & student relations
13 = Attitude/background, affecting relations/results

SOCIAL ISSUES
14 = Social issues & culture/region/family life & school
15 = Social issues & student life & school
16 = Social issues & beyond school

17 = Other / not sure

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